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ABSTRACT

This study examined the spelling growth of kindergarten children on a monthly basis to determine if new information about the spelling growth of children could be found and if there was a relationship between spelling level and the point at which children begin to put spaces between words in written sentences. Twenty-seven kindergartners were asked to write seven words (cement, ocean, punishment, motion, tomato, karate, and vacation) and one sentence (The giraffe eats leaves) eight times over the course of the school year at approximately 1-month intervals. Spelling performance was then rated on a seven-level scale. Asking children to spell the words on a monthly basis was found to provide no new insights concerning spelling development. The study found that the children progressed through the same levels as children in similar studies. It also found that at the beginning of the year only one child put spaces between the words in the sentence, whereas 13 children put spaces between the words at the end of the year. Implications for spelling instruction in the early childhood years are discussed. Contains seven references. (MDM)

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Spelling in the Kindergarten: A Constructivist Analysis of Year-Long Spelling Development

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Spelling in the Kindergarten: A Constructivist Analysis of Year-Long Spelling Development

Many researchers (Bissex, 1980; Chomsky, 1979; Henderson, 1985; Read, 1975) have shown repeatedly that young children "invent" spelling by going through several levels before constructing the conventional spelling system. This research indicates that young children do not learn to spell merely by memorizing words from a spelling list.

The most systematic research available on children's early spelling development is that of Ferreiro and Teberosky (1982). They conducted their research with four- to six-year-old Spanish-speaking children in Argentina, and based it on the theory of Jean Piaget. Piaget (1926/1967) believed that children begin to construct knowledge about astronomy, meteorology, botany, and geology long before they go to school. Ferreiro and Teberosky hypothesized that young children must also have many ideas about how words are written before they receive instruction.

Over a period of several years, we (Kamii, Long, Manning, & Manning, 1990) have studied the similarities and differences between English-speaking and Spanish-speaking children's spelling development, using the research of Ferreiro and Teberosky as a framework. For the present study, we had two questions: (1) Could we gain new information about the spelling growth of children, if we assessed their spelling on a monthly basis? and (2) Is there a relationship between spelling level and the point

at which children begin to put spaces between words in a written sentence?

Method

The 27 subjects in this study were public school kindergarten children from two classes in a Southern American city. The school is located in a middle class neighborhood, and only a few of the children were on free or reduced lunch. About half of the children were Caucasian and half were African American; both classes were taught by whole language teachers.

For the study, each child was taken from the classroom and asked to write seven words (cement, ocean, punishment, motion, tomato, karate, vacation), and one sentence (The giraffe eats leaves.). When necessary, questions were asked to help us understand the child's ideas underlying the writing. The assessments were conducted eight times during the year at approximately one-month intervals. Although several attempts were made to write with all children each month, only 18 have eight samples; six children wrote seven times and three children were assessed six times.

The children's spelling was analyzed by three researchers using categories developed by Kamii, Long, Manning, and Manning (1990); the categories were based on criteria established by Ferreiro and Teberosky (1982). If at least four of the seven words met the criteria for a level, the spelling was categorized at that level. The levels of spelling are as follows:

Level	Description
0	Children at this level draw pictures or scribble rather than make letters or symbol-like forms.
1	Children write a string of letters for a word that has no set number of letters from one word to another. The string might run across the entire page as a child spells a word.
2	Children write a string of letters that usually consists of three to six letters for each word. The letters may be different for each word or the same letters might be rearranged from one word to the next.
2X	Children at this level--as in level 2--write a string of letters that usually consists of three to six letters for each word. The letters may be different for each word or the same letters might be rearranged from one word to the next. In addition to meeting the criteria for level 2, children write the "correct" first letter in words.
3	Children at this level--consonantal level--make letter-sound correspondences, mostly by consonants. For example, they often write smt for cement.
4	Children at this level--the alphabetic level--make letter-sound correspondences by consonants and vowels. For instance, they might write yakashen for vacation or moshun for motion. These consistencies suggest the construction of a system approaching conventional spelling.
5	Children spell most words in the conventional way.

Results

Findings in this study are very similar to our previous research in that these kindergarten children progressed through the same levels as young children in our other studies (See Figure 1). Asking children to spell the words monthly provided no new insights about spelling development; however, this year-long study shows the rate of progress of each child through the

levels. Children who entered at lower levels made significant progress. For example, three children who entered at level one progressed at least two levels (See Table 1). Although four children appeared to make no progress because they remained at the same level, only two children remained unchanged in their notions about how words are written. Children who began the year at a high level (level 3 or 4) made significant progress as determined by a close examination of their writing samples.

Insert Figure 1 and Table 1 about here

Only one child who was at level 3 at the beginning of the year put spaces between the words in the sentence, "The giraffe eats leaves." At the end of the year, 13 children put spaces between the words of the sentence (See Figure 2). All were at level 3 when they began using spaces. But, interestingly, there were seven children at level 3 and one at level 4 who, at the end of the year, still did not put spaces between words (See Table 2).

Insert Figure 2 and Table 2 about here

Discussion

Findings in this study are very similar to findings in other studies that show spelling as a developmental process. Children moved from one level to the next and did not skip any one level.

Children must learn to spell, but the most important issue is how and at what moment in children's spelling development instruction should occur. If level 1 or 2 children are given spelling instruction before they realize that there are correspondences between letters and sounds, the instruction is likely to be meaningless and confusing to them. On the other hand, a child at level 3 should benefit from instruction that is within the context of real language.

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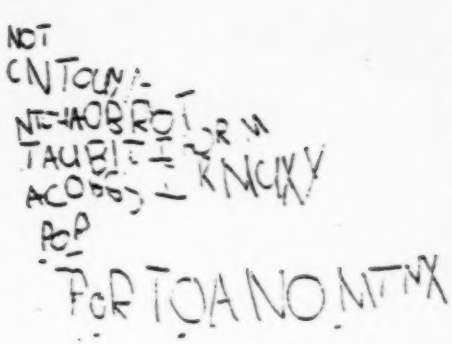
Figure 1. Levels of spelling



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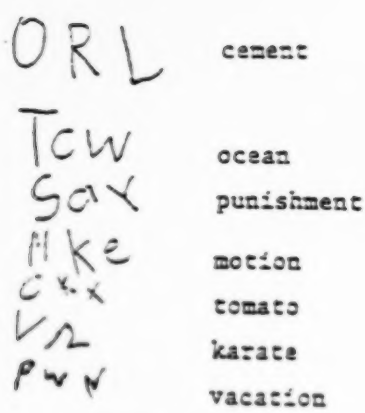

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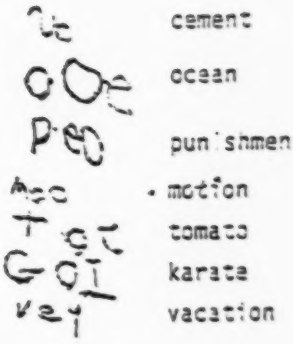

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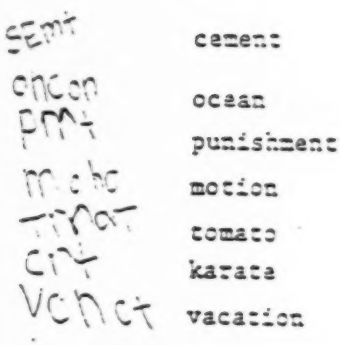

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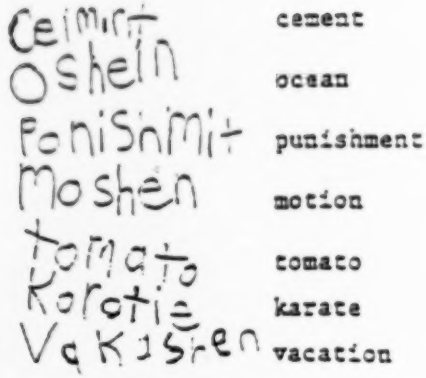

LEVEL 4

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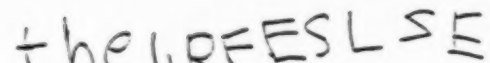
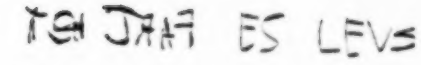
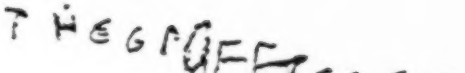
Figure 2. Spaces between words of a sentence



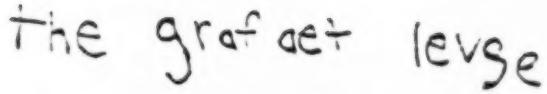
The giraffe eats leaves.



The giraffe eats leaves.



The giraffe eats leaves.



The giraffe eats leaves.

Table 1

Monthly Levels of Spelling

Student No.	O	N	D	J	F	M	A	M	Comments
1	3	3	3	3	3	3	-	3	very high 3 in F, M, MY
2	1	1	1	1	1	1	2X	2X	
3	2	2X	2X	2X	2X	2X	2X	2X	almost 3 in A, MY
4	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	remained low level
5	2	2	2X	2X	2X	2X	2X	2X	almost 3 in MY
6	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	almost 4 in F, M, A, MY
7	1	1	2X	3	3	3	-	3	high 3 in F, M, MY
8	1	1	2	2X	2X	2X	2X	2X	progress on sentence
9	1	2	2	2	2X	3	-	-	
10	2X	2X	2X	2X	2X	2X	3	3	
11	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	no progress
12	2	2	2	2	2X	2X	2X	2X	almost 3 in MY
13	2	2X	2X	2X	2X	2X	2X	3	consistent progress
14	1	-	1	1	2X	2X	-	2X	high 2X in MY
15	2	2X	2X	2X	2X	2X	3	3	consistent progress
16	2X	2X	-	3	3	3	3	3	
17	2X	3	3	3	3	4	4	4	
18	2	2X	3	3	3	3	3	3	high 3 in F, M, A, MY
19	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	entered at high level
20	1	1	1	1	1	1	2X	3	
21	2X	2X	2X	2X	2X	2X	3	3	
22	2X	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	high 3 in F, M, A, MY
23	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	entered at high level
24	2X	2X	3	3	3	3	3	-	
25	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	
26	2X	2X	-	3	3	3	-	3	
27	2X	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	good progress

*A minus (-) indicates no spelling sample available

Table 2

Levels of Spelling and Spaces

Student No.	No. of Samples	Entry Level	Final Level	Spaces Appeared
1	7	3	3	-
2	8	1	2X	-
3	8	2	2X	-
4	8	2	2	-
5	8	2	2X	-
6	7	3	3	3
7	7	1	3	3
8	8	1	2X	-
9	6	1	3	3
10	8	2X	3	3
11	7	2	2	-
12	8	2	2X	-
13	8	2	3	-
14	6	1	2X	3
15	8	2	3	-
16	7	2	3	3
17	8	2X	3	3
18	8	2	3	-
19	8	3	4	3
20	8	1	3	-
21	8	2X	3	3
22	8	2X	3	3
23	8	3	4	-
24	7	2X	3	-
25	8	1	2	-
26	6	2X	3	3
27	8	2X	3	-

*A minus (-) indicates no spaces appeared between words.